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Michael Lewis*

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“SEEING THE WORLD WHOLE” : AN INTERVIEW WITH WILLIAM CRONON

Michael Lewis

William Cronon holds the Frederick Jackson Turner chair in History, Geography, and Environmental Studies at the University of Wisconsin – Madison. Justly recognized as one of America’s foremost historians, Dr. Cronon has been one of a handful of scholars responsible for the development and growth of Environmental History over the last few decades. Among his publications are *Changes in the Land*, a path-breaking environmental history of colonial New England, *Nature’s Metropolis*, winner of the Bancroft prize, and *Uncommon Ground*, a state of the art collection of essays based upon a seminar in Environmental History which he convened at the University of California – Riverside. During his visit to the University of Iowa as an Ida Beam Visiting Professor, Dr. Cronon graciously agreed to meet with me for a few minutes to discuss his work.

How did you become involved in environmental history — how did you choose to take your scholarship in that direction?

Well, I’ve had three long-standing life commitments, which actually go all the way back to grade school. One, perhaps my earliest commitment, was to being a writer. Actually, for a long time I thought that I wanted to be a fiction writer or a novelist and only gradually did I decide I couldn’t imagine supporting myself in that way. So I had to come up with an academic discipline that would allow me to do the kind of writing that I wanted to do, but still had a salary as a university professor. So writing is one theme. A second theme is my long-standing interest in the natural world and natural history. A very early commitment to environmentalism, as it emerged in the late 60s, is one of my more important political commitments. I entered college thinking that I was going to be a quantitative plant ecologist, of all things, and then went through a long migration into different, but related, things. And third, I was interested in history. I was the child of an American historian, so I am an academic brat. The combination of my interests in nature, history, and writing, these three

commitments, was one of the things I was trying to figure out in college. And in my senior year of college I almost by accident took a course on the History of the American West, which had woven into it a significant history of the public lands and the American conservation movement. I sort of had a moment of epiphany where it really felt like I could combine all of my passions in a single discipline. And so from that moment on it was pretty clear that Western and Environmental History, Frontier and Environmental History, would be my focus.

It seems fairly apparent to me, based on your writings, that you are committed to the idea of the public intellectual, or the historian as advocate. Has that been a consistent interest for you throughout your career?

Well, I'm not sure that I would say "historian as advocate." That is maybe not quite the phrase I would use. I certainly am committed to the role of the public intellectual, in the sense that the writer in me, as well as the teacher in me (and I honor both of those roles co-equally, I think they complement each other in many valuable ways), believes very strongly that the knowledge of the academy, the knowledge that the academy discovers, needs to be shared with the larger world. So learning how we can write and communicate in such a way that the excitement and the passion of the ideas that too easily seem to members of the public like dry, inert, stuff — how to make those come alive, seems to me to be one of the really interesting questions. And I think that more and more academics are worrying about that. And that is certainly a good thing. Certainly in all my training of graduate students, for instance, I work very hard on helping people write books that are books.

Environmental History is intriguing because most of the people that are involved in it are also environmentalists. How do you see the boundary between environmentalism as a movement and Environmental History as an academic discipline?

Obviously, Environmental History is not unusual in that respect. It is just one of several of what you might call the new histories that emerged in the late 60s — Women's History, African-American History, Chicano History, Labor History. All of these have political movements behind them that provide part of the motivation and the energy for the people that are drawn into those fields, because of the way that they care about the politics or the moral issues that are raised. I think when the scholars in those fields of History are doing their jobs properly, inevitably it is a sign of the maturity of those sub-fields that they exist in some tension with the political movements that helped spawn them, and that they are in a constant dialogue with them. And obviously my own work and the work of many of my colleagues raises complicated questions about environmentalism. My own view is that environmentalism is the better for grappling with those questions. The obvious one that has surfaced in my work is that I think there is a tendency within environmentalism towards a rather

ahistorical way of thinking about nature, in which nature becomes one version of the godhead. That godhead is a kind of eternal disembodied, outside of time kind of thing. There is a complicated cultural history behind that way of seeing nature, and that vision of nature carries a lot of baggage, both for good and for ill. And so, looking at things historically, and trying to understand the phenomena of a political movement like environmentalism, in time, inevitably means having some critical distance from that movement. I think that any political movement worth its salt not only should be able to tolerate that kind of historical criticism but should in fact welcome it, even though inevitably there are going to be wild disagreements about what it all means.

Is there also a fear that as Environmental Historians become willing to criticize or think critically about some of environmentalism's ideological commitments, like seeing nature as a vision of the godhead, that there will be a separation and that members of the environmental movement will come to view Environmental History as irrelevant to their activism?

I don't think irrelevant would be the word that people would use . . .

Antagonistic?

Yes, it might be that antagonistic would be even stronger. Sure, I think that's always a possibility. Inevitably, as an intellectual sub-field within the academy matures it generates its own internal debates, its own set of concerns, which are really driven by its own imperatives, intellectual imperatives. And it is not surprising that some of those would look arcane or irrelevant to people out there on the front lines who think that they don't have the time to be wasting on these abstract ideas. Again, my own faith is that often, what looks like dry, narrow, irrelevant, minutial (if that were a word), academic debates, actually have quite profound implications. For instance, I've had a couple of graduate students now write quite important studies of the class conflicts that have attended the early history of conservation in the United States — the imposition of elite notions of what nature is, or how nature ought to be managed, on essentially rural populations which had their own ways of interacting with the natural world. These rural populations find themselves confronting a newly professional and bureaucratic state with new concepts and notions of how nature should be managed. And a lot of those conflicts which you can find going on in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century United States of course happen world wide and are one of the ways that environmentalism expresses itself as a form of imperialism in other parts of the world. Not to see that the ways in which first world environmentalists today are confronting reactions to their environmental politics (which are read as colonialist) have a deep history in the American past is to miss just how far back this set of contemporary issues goes.

To what degree do you think of yourself as a cultural critic — like Haraway or

others who expressly make this claim? I am interested in how you are defining yourself. You are in three different departments at Wisconsin, you do work which, in Uncommon Ground, does appear to be cultural criticism, then you have Changes in the Land and Nature's Metropolis which are both very different sorts of work . . .

Well, it is funny. I had not thought about this, but I have never called myself a cultural critic, and it is not a label that I particularly aspire to. I think of myself as a historian. Period. And I think of myself more as a historian than as an environmental historian, in that sense. In terms of the future of the field called Environmental History, were it to happen that all historians would embrace nature or environment as a kind of fundamental category of social/historical analysis the way that class-race-gender are typically treated as fundamental categories, and as a result of that Environmental History disappeared as a separate sub-field, I wouldn't have much regret about it. My project is to know what I can about the human past, and to show the relevance of that knowledge for the world we inhabit today, not just in a presentist sense, but in the rich ways in which the past is connected to the present. Inevitably that act has consequences — it gives us some distance on the present. And that distance, I am sure, expresses itself as cultural criticism, for many people who encounter that kind of history. But it is not mainly my job to critique the present. My job is to understand the past in rich ways.

Very interesting. So you are not committed to the idea of Environmental History as a separate field — you think that in the greatest possible way it could be integrated within all historical investigation and the need for it would disappear.

Yes, conceivably. One of the things that is interesting about Environmental History as opposed to some of the other new histories that emerged in the 60s that we have already named is that there does seem present in Environmental History, maybe not uniquely, but very strongly, an impulse towards synthesis. You could argue that some of the other new histories are about looking at chunks of the past that had formerly been ignored by other groups and seeing them in their own right, seeing them for their own autonomous value, and that is a wholly honorable project I can celebrate as much as anybody does. But I think one of the great contributions of Environmental History, limited though it may be and hence critique-able as it may be, is the impulse to see things as connected that didn't look connected before, and to see the world whole. That impulse of seeing the world whole can be misleading, because there are a lot of ways in which environmental historians, like environmentalists, have been blind to some features of the world that need to be connected. Specifically environmentalists and environmental historians often tend to be blind to class-race-gender. Nonetheless, the impulse towards synthesis, to me, is what means that ultimately Environmental History is History, and it is hard to figure out what *isn't* Environmental History. Virtually everything in history is somehow

environmental in its implications. So it is hard to draw a clear boundary between what is and is not Environmental History.

In one of your lectures here at the University of Iowa this week you noted that your earlier work had been more materialist in concern, but that your work on the Wilderness idea was clearly more idealist, and you were now trying to combine the two. It seems to me that there really has been a split between the people who have done materialist Environmental History and those who have done idealist Environmental History, in the past. Is it almost an unbridgeable split?

I don't think it is an unbridgeable split. Although I am the first to say that *Changes in the Land* and *Nature's Metropolis* are deeply materialist in their impulses, they have idealist things going on within them. The analysis of property that is in *Changes in the Land*, although it operates in a profoundly materialist way, is an idea, not a reality. Property is not a real thing in the world; it is an idea. And I guess the way I would say it — really good History, quite apart from Environmental History, has to take both the material world and material relations seriously, and people's ideas seriously. We have to do them both. And so the book I am now doing about the city of Portage, Wisconsin very definitely has idealist questions running around in its center, but it has some materialist stuff running around in its center too. By the same token, people read this essay I wrote on Wilderness in *Uncommon Ground* and think that I have gone off the deep end in terms of idealist emphasis on an idea, but in fact, if you read *Changes in the Land* carefully, or if you read the last two paragraphs of the prologue of *Nature's Metropolis* carefully, the Wilderness essay is fully anticipated in those two books. It is virtually entirely laid out in those books, and all the Wilderness essay does is make explicit what was quietly implicit in the frame of those earlier works.

In your Wilderness essay I was interested in the connections you made between ideas of the "sacred" and the "wild," connections you reiterated a few minutes ago in talking about the environmental movement and nature as the godhead. Is there a way in which contemporary Environmental History is akin to, or the intellectual descendant of, older modes of historical inquiry such as the study of religion and cultural belief systems?

Oh sure. I wouldn't even call it older modes of historical inquiry. It is a mode of investigation. Yes. Absolutely. I believe very strongly that if you want to understand environmentalism you have to see the ways in which environmentalism is a religion. And I say that with nothing pejorative in it, though some people hear that and think that is a slam on environmentalism. It is the farthest thing from being a slam on it.

You have written that "it is my own religion."

Yes, exactly. So I think that much of what makes environmentalism such a passionate movement for the people who embrace it is that people are bearing witness to their vision of the godhead. And that is only a critique if one imagines that there is no god in the world, or even if one imagines that religion is only the opiate of the masses. My own view is that there are many gods in this world and that you cannot come to terms with human history without recognizing the many, many ways in which god has acted through history, through the perceptions and the beliefs and visions and passions of human beings who have believed in their god. And so from that point of view if you want to understand what motivates people to want to protect nature, you have got to understand the ways in which they regard nature as sacred and how sacred nature is motivating their relationship to this vision of the godhead.

My sense is that traditionally the academy has dealt poorly with sacredness when doing inquiry into history or culture.

I don't know whether I . . . I am not sure that I have a view of that. It is certainly true that there is a deeply secular impulse within the academy that I think tempts academicians to be cold-blooded in the way that they interact with and think about people's faith and their belief in the sacred. But there certainly are profound studies of religion that are floating around out there in the academic tradition, and I wouldn't want to forget those. I think of a book like Barbara Novak's *Nature and Culture*, which remains really one of the great works, I think. That is a book that takes nature very seriously as an object of religious devotion. I don't think that it does violence to that faith in the act of analyzing it. Part of the problem is the secular impulse within the academy, which sees a core analytical project as being historicizing, locating god in time. For those essentialist religious traditions which believe that god is eternal and exists outside of time, the act of historicizing god becomes a deeply threatening one. And that is true whether those essentialist faiths are fundamentalist Christian, or fundamentalist Wilderness worshipping. And the analogue between the historicizing project which transformed Christianity in the nineteenth century with the historical criticism of the Bible as the sourcebook is directly akin to a critique of sacred nature as a static eternal carrier of value. My own belief is that you can have a god that exists in history without it ceasing to be sacred. And some of the controversy in the Wilderness essay, I think, comes from the fact that some of the people who react most negatively to my view of this are those who cannot imagine a historical god.

In your writings and lectures, you have discussed Edenic narratives as being crucial to Environmental History and environmentalism. How would you conceptualize an Environmental History without an Edenic narrative at its core, without either a fall from grace or a need to reclaim the garden?

Well, I think that if you are writing a history of environmentalism, it is hard for

me to imagine doing away with the Edenic narratives that are so much the core mythic structure that motivates some of the political views that are rolled into environmentalism. But if you are talking about Environmental History as the history of people's changing interactions with the natural world, without reference to a particular ideology or movement, you still have to have stories, you still have to have something to organize the narrative and make it compelling.

A mythic structure?

Well, mythic may be going a little bit too strong to describe it, though there certainly can be mythic narratives. But for my own tastes, a narrative which is not simply two dimensionally either declensionist or progressive is a more interesting narrative. Because it is more complicated it has greater subtlety, more irony, and more to be explained, more to be figured out. And it is closer to the way that most of us experience the real world. I actually think that we are at a stage now in the evolution of Environmental History that we are seeing some of the younger people who are entering the field — the people who are just now in graduate school or heading out of graduate school — not writing familiar declensionist narratives. I think they are as bored by those narratives as anybody is. You can see this in the studies that I alluded to earlier, where you see rural peoples in conflict with bureaucratic environmentalists, and struggles over whose vision of nature is the one that will be authorized by law. That is not a declensionist story. It is not quite clear what kind of story that is, it is a story that is as pink as it is green in its political coloring, but I guess the quick answer to your question is there are a lot of different stories, and they don't all need to be grouped under upward or downward narratives.

One of the interesting things that has emerged from Environmental Studies is the increased number of people doing interdisciplinary or multi-disciplinary work, and how people term themselves as multi or interdisciplinary versus terming themselves as at this point doing history, at this point doing something else.

I think that just has to do with the construction of the academy. Environmental Studies, if anything, predates Environmental History as a niche within the academy. So, there are plenty of Environmental History people who regard themselves as contributors to Environmental Studies — Environmental Studies is just a broader definition of the niche. What is often interesting is the difference between universities that have something called Environmental Studies on the one hand and those which have Environmental Science on the other. And those can be quite different as modes of discourse.

Right. One has classes in biology and geology, the other more in the social sciences. Do you think that this focus upon topics of inquiry, like the environment, is going to lead to any changes in the academy, where people will try to think of

themselves as having multiple points of entry into the academy because of the topic of their study?

I am sure that inevitably it will, but I would also say that the academy is an extraordinarily conservative intellectual structure, and so although it gradually evolves and changes, it is also true that money and power and tenure flow along pretty well defined channels. I guess the other thing I would add to that is much of the best interdisciplinary work that I know is done by people who are fully trained and have their experience of rigor within a given discipline and then move out from that discipline to try and incorporate other insights that their discipline can't by itself encompass. And I don't know that this is an accident. Having been responsible for founding the Environmental Studies program at Yale, and having done a lot of thinking about Environmental Studies, I am still not completely persuaded that Environmental Studies is a discipline. In fact, I am inclined to think that it is *not* a discipline, by which I mean that there is not a predictable set of questions or techniques or analytical tests for recognizing what is or is not a rigorous argument within Environmental Studies. Environmental Studies, like some of the other "studies," is parasitic for its sense of rigor on other disciplines. That is not to say that it could not ever have that, but I do think that a core part of professional education in the education of graduate students into a discipline, the disciplining that goes on in graduate training, is giving people an experience of what constitutes rigor. And that is conservative. The academy tends to be conservative on what does and does not count as rigor. And that is not a bad thing. Rigor is an important value that the academy has — near its very center. And from that point of view, the real challenge of interdisciplinary work is how do you cross disciplines? How do you absorb into one discipline the insights of another discipline without losing your bullshit detectors, if you will, so that you don't get tricked into a really stupid position that anybody in the original discipline would know is idiotic to begin with, but you don't recognize as such because you have never had that experience of rigor.

One of the significant boundary-crossings which occurs within both Environmental Studies and Environmental History involves scholars in the humanities working with ecological theories and ideas derived by scientists. Do you think that there is ever a tendency by humanists to take these scientific theories at face value, rather than realizing that they are also situated within a web of cultural values?

Well, if there is, it is simply a token of the failure of our ability to translate rigorously across disciplines. I am sure that happens. I am quite sure that any professional ecologist would know that howlers do in fact get embedded in Environmental History in ways that all of us should look at as problematic. But that is just to say, there is a lot of bad history out there, just like there is a lot of bad ecology and bad stuff all around. We should not be surprised by that. Our

project is to hold ourselves to the highest possible standards of rigor in the analytical work that we do. If we borrow things from ecology, we owe it to both ourselves and to the science of ecology, and most of all to our history, to make sure that when we make an argument founded upon ecological premises that we know what is at stake there, that we know the underlying substructure, that we know what we are committing ourselves to in terms of where those ideas came from within Ecology, how they were arrived at, what is problematic about them, and particularly how the problematic elements that are part of any scientific paradigm could have an effect on our historical argument. Because sometimes what is problematic in the ecological argument may or may not apply to the historical argument we are building on top of it. And the only way that we can know that is to be in dialogue with the ecologists who are sharing those ideas with us. And ecologists are doing this too. They are always borrowing historical stuff in deeply problematic ways that any historian would say, "They think they can quote a source two hundred years later as evidence of what happened in the 1600s — what planet did they come from?" We do the same thing, and so the trick is to be in a rich enough dialogue with those disciplines that are our sister disciplines in this project that we have people who can check us and say "I am really surprised that you did that. Why did you do that? Let's talk about that." That is what we need.

I was excited to see that an ecologist had been included in the seminar which led to the production of Uncommon Ground. Have you received commentary from other scientists who have read that work? Are you aware of scientists reacting to the book? Is there that rich dialogue going on?

I have certainly had extended conversations with ecologists about that book. Some of those conversations are hard to peel apart from what was provocative or controversial about my particular Wilderness essay in *Uncommon Ground*. There are some scientists who really found that set of historical arguments about Wilderness very troubling. So part of the argument lies in that for me. And of course, we are in a time right now in which there is a backlash against post-modernism, and a backlash against science studies. A lot of scientists are deeply dubious about cultural studies questions about scientific paradigms and how they work, and that has made it harder in some ways to have some of these kinds of conversations that would have been fruitful. Both sides of that debate have allowed themselves to get positioned in rather silly ways. Scientists think that what the science studies people are doing is saying that there is no world out there and we can have no knowledge of that world. On the other hand, there are a lot of science studies people who almost seem to be saying at times that science has nothing meaningful to say about the world that is not just pure metaphoric social construction. Those are both silly positions, and any rational person ought to recognize that they are both silly. There is no dialogue if you start from either of those positions.

You have written that "We need poets and priests, and not just historians, if we hope to discover the many meanings of the world in which we make our homes." Do these things really have to be exclusive from history? You speak of your own interest in the craft of writing — how narrowly do you define history? Aren't there historians who fill this role also?

Well, there are historians who do fill these roles, I think. Don Worster writes as a prophet as much as he does as a historian. And there are times when I write as an eulogist or as a poet as much as when I write as a historian, but I am conscious that those are different roles. And I think that it is important to remember that those are different roles. When I end *Nature's Metropolis* with a moral meditation on alienation from nature and what is implied by that in the way that we live now, that is certainly not disconnected from the history that I write, but I am also speaking as a moral . . . I am not sure I can dignify it by calling it a moral philosopher, but I am certainly moralizing. And I am speaking from a committed moral position. And I think this is somewhat different from the position that I speak from when I speak with the authority of the historian. Again, not that you can ever be all of these things, but I do think that it is important to know when you are playing which role. If you do not know that, I think that you are probably not doing justice to the rigorous requirements that your scholarship requires. And here I am NOT defending the objectivity of the scholar. What I am trying to defend is the act of critical self-knowing that I think, at its best, is what scholarship is about, where any position that you might adopt is critique-able. That is clearly one of the things a scholar needs to be prepared to say. No matter how passionately you believe in something, you have to be willing to say, "Well, I could call that into question. These are the questions I would ask if I wanted to really probe to the heart of that thing to suggest what is wrong with it." Whereas when you moralize, when you declare a committed position, you are withholding that critical stance, however briefly, and saying "This is where I stand, this is what I believe."